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ABSTRACT

Case studies are presented of three gifted students, indicating the social and academic problems which are standing in the way of their potential development. The students include a Vietnamese-American ninth-grade girl who has difficulty with English and does not feel accepted by other students, an underachieving seventh grade boy who speaks out and continually makes noises, and a junior high boy who fails to turn in daily assignments and has no patience with routine tasks. The paper concludes that needs of the "problem" gifted are not being adequately met in the present system. The importance of differentiating curriculum and suiting it to students' individual needs is emphasized. Parents are encouraged to honestly face their child's problems, discuss options, and work with professionals in securing the best situation possible for their child. Counselors and teachers are urged to work together in planning interventions for troubled gifted teenagers. (JDD)

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Gifted Teenagers with Problems

Three Case Studies

by Theresa Monaco and Jane Goodner

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Is the gifted teenager intelligent, enthusiastic, productive, talented, successful? Is he/she the ideal student? Many teachers and parents think of the gifted student in these terms. Even the term itself implies something very special, a "gift" which was granted at birth, something very precious. But not all gifts given these children are blessings. Some of the special gifts are closer to "curses." What goes wrong in a child with the gift of superior intellect who just can not fit into society? What happens when the brilliance becomes the young person's greatest problem? Some gifted students face serious difficulties in adjusting, socializing, conforming and accepting his/her own giftedness. Often these young people are ostracized and isolated by their own abilities (W. D. H. Georgiades, Personal Communication, June 12, 1989). They find ways to cope with the social and education problems, sometimes to the point of denying their own abilities. As important as addressing the educational needs of the gifted is the importance of dealing with the social and personal needs of a sensitive teenager trying to grow up gifted instead of wanting not to be gifted. (Clark, 1988).

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University of Houston sponsors a two week program, Helping Exceptional Learners Progress (HELP), each summer for gifted youngsters in the area. The center works with the teenagers in a positive, supportive atmosphere. The children are able to express their concerns in a non-threatening environment. A major thrust of the summer workshop is product development. Through independent projects, chosen and developed by the gifted student, much insight to their special abilities and needs has been gained. Case studies of many of these young people indicate the severity of the problems they face daily. Excerpts from the studies on three gifted students (the names have been changed) indicate social and academic problems which are standing in the way of their potential development.

Tien

Tien was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1973, two years before the city fell into Communist hands. Her mother wanted to leave the city at the time of the takeover, but her grandmother and aunts did not want to leave their homes. Tien and her mother remained. In 1979, deciding it had become too dangerous living in Saigon, Tien's mother paid gold bars to be smuggled out of the country. Tien remembers traveling by a bicycle-pulled rickshaw to a small camp on the coast. There they waited for several months for a boat. When they were finally out of the country, pirates attached the boat and stole the family's gold, jewelry and valuables. Tien remembers being very frightened. She held

her hands over her ears to save her gold earrings. The pirates left her alone, she thinks, because she was young. Since her arrival in Houston, Tien has lived with her mother and grandmother, who joined them later. Tien's mother took and passed her U.S. citizenship test. Tien received her citizenship automatically when her mother became a citizen.

Tien, a ninth grader, was in gifted classes in junior high school, but when she started school in the first grade, she knew no English. She remembered that one of her uncles wrote a note for her to show the teacher when she needed to go to the restroom. The first year was a difficult year for Tien. She was held back because of her problems with the English language, but her math skills were strong.

Tien scored 134 on the self-scored I.Q. test given at the Center for Gifted and Talented. Even though this score is well above average, Tien was concerned and felt that she had done poorly. In an informal discussion of a social issue Tien showed unusual maturity and sensitivity, which is characteristic of gifted students. At one point some students said they felt that sometimes mercy killing is understandable, even though it is legally wrong. Tien reacted strongly, "What about human compassion?" Tien showed a much higher level of sensitivity in this discussion than the other students, probably because of the difficulties of her early years.

Tien is strong academically. She has a thirst for

literature and reads on an adult level. She read two difficult Victorian novels in a matter of a few days and demonstrated complete comprehension. She talked at length about plots and subplots, motivations and complications. Her enthusiasm was apparent. In her choice of a project for the workshop, Tien would not settle for a presentation based on her readings. She chose to study nineteenth century fashion design and make clothes worn by the heroines of the novel. This was quite an undertaking, probably too ambitious, but she completed the project. In her presentation, Tien was efficient and concise but very nervous.

Tien has some troubling internal pressures. She feels that she is not accepted by the other students in school. She grew up in a different culture and has a different cultural background. Oriental youth are usually not as open as American youth. Furthermore, Tien is hampered by her difficulty with English, and her self-esteem suffers. Unfortunately, rather than trying to learn to make new friends and socialize, Tien clings to one girl friend. She accidentally saw instructions on her junior high school permanent record to separate her from her only friend. Tien and her friend hope they will be together again in some classes in high school.

Tien is very capable and determined. She has a strong sense of right and wrong, of justice and injustice. However, in group situations she prefers to remain in the background and listen.

Fortunately, she doesn't miss much in class and is receiving an excellent education. When Tien speaks, which is seldom, she speaks very quietly. She is emotionally immature despite advanced intellect. She becomes nervous under pressure and is afraid of speaking before a group. To deal with her stress during her project report, Tien wrote everything she wanted to say on note cards. This coping technique worked very well. At the beginning of the program Tien responded to a questionnaire that she hoped to learn "how to use my abilities and make them work for me." She also wanted to "think for myself, better situate myself, and relate with people and learn from them."

Tien seems to be comfortable with her giftedness. She knows that she is not like the other students in her abilities, and she is often criticized for this. Tien has high expectations for herself; often higher than adult expectations are for her. It would be advantageous if Tien's high school teachers were aware of her past, her difficulties socializing and her cultural differences. As a first generation immigrant, Tien is more determined than most students to achieve academically in order to secure the "American dream."

Danny

Danny is an eleven year old student going into the seventh grade. He has an I.Q. of 145. Though he enjoys working in a group, Danny feels he learns much better working by himself or in a one-on-one setting. He likes speaking out in class and sharing

his opinions, but he feels he can write a better answer.

Danny demonstrated advanced skills at an early age. He was walking and talking at one, reading and adding two 2 digit numbers at age three and riding a two-wheel bicycle at age four. Danny's private kindergarten teacher said he was very advanced for his age and suggested to his mother that she seek advanced work for him in the first grade. The school did not respond to this request. So far, Danny has not been placed in any gifted classes and has underachieved in at least two classes this past year, resulting in failure. After continued discipline problems at his school (not bringing books to class, tardy, talking, not returning signed detention papers), his mother had him privately tested by a neurologist. Tests showed an above average I.Q. and no other problems. When these results were shown to the school district, they said that these scores are high enough to admit him to the gifted program without teacher recommendations.

Danny has many interests and excels in many activities, especially baseball, bowling, karate and music. He often argues with family members and stays in trouble because of school behavior and grades. Frequently, he is told that he is lazy and he agrees with this verdict. Danny is often punished by being sent to his room, grounded "for most of the school year," and loss of television privileges. He doesn't think of himself as smart and called the other students in the program "intellectuals." He considers himself as only "kind of smart."

Danny says he doesn't do well at school because he doesn't try. He failed social studies and English and had to make them up at summer school. Danny said that in summer school one teacher called him a "geek."

At first Danny seems loud and bossy. It seems like he pays little attention to what is going on around him, speaks out and continually makes noises. He doesn't listen or respond to corrections. Socialization is a part of teaching the gifted and talented student. After working closely with Danny, however, it is obvious that there is more to him than this. He is actually a sensitive young man who is acting big to impress his friends, but going home and crying at night. He is kind, considerate, helpful, a bit shy, very pleasant and fun to be with. He acts up, he says, to see if he can get away with it, trying to identify with his peers. Danny's choice of a project for the summer program showed a great deal of sensitivity. He created a project in response to his study of the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs. He designed his own "tomb", carefully designing his own architectural drawings and writing his "dedication" and "will." He wrote a poem about how he wants to be remembered when he dies: as honest and truthful, loving and caring, and strong and healthy.

Danny is like so many gifted students who are often screened out of programs. He becomes bored with routine tasks, self-critical and critical of others. Yet, when Danny begins to know

and respect someone, he responds. He learns quickly and wants to know how things work. He reads on his own and is interested in adult problems. But Danny's needs are not met in the regular program, as evidenced by his lack of interest and behavior. Finding school boring because he is not in the more challenging gifted classes, Danny responds with misbehavior born of frustration. The gap between his academic grades and his intelligence test scores is wide. A close, working relationship between Danny's parents and the school needs to be established to open lines of communication and to finally place Danny in the correct program to meet his needs. (Hackler, 1988)

Brent

Brent, age 13, has been enrolled in the gifted reading, English and science programs in his junior high school for a year and a half. Originally Brent was enrolled in the gifted math program, but he withdrew after one-half year on the advice of his teacher. Gifted programs are only available in these three areas in Brent's school. He scored 138 on the self-scoring I.Q. test given at the University of Houston. According to Brent, he scored 141 on the I.Q. test given by his school to identify him for the gifted program. Brent already has plans to attend the University of Texas at Austin after he finishes high school.

Friendships are extremely important to Brent. He has three special friends with whom he enjoys such activities as skateboarding and rock music, some of which Brent composes.

Brent plays violin, keyboard, piano and guitar. Music, both rock and classical, is important to Brent, though he no longer takes lessons. He says that he is very glad that he studied music, but now he likes to experiment on his own. Brent hopes one day to be a professional writer and write short stories. He prefers this to the writing assignments he does for his classes. He has also begun work on his first novel. Most of Brent's work is patterned after that of his favorite author, Stephen King. He says that he "enjoys gory things, horror" and that he likes "getting scared." This is obvious in Brent's writing, in which terror, the unknown and fear play a big part. Brent's interest are many and varied.

Brent is highly verbal and exhibits excellent communication skills. He willingly talks about himself, sharing his feelings and work. He empathizes with the feelings of others, saying he doesn't like to "pick on" others because he knows how they feel, being the smallest in the his group of friends. This empathy was also apparent in his choice of a topic for his project. His project on pollution showed his concern for and interest in the world around him, as well as his problem solving skills. Brent exhibits in both his writing and his own physical risk-taking a fascination with the macabre that is typical of many young people. This preoccupation, however, is offset by his varied interests in other areas.

Brent is having some difficulty in school because he fails to turn in daily assignments. He has no patience with routine

tasks. His mastery of the material covered is apparent on tests, but his lack of daily work often results in low grades. Brent exhibits many of the characteristics of the gifted child mentioned by (Maker, 1982) and (Renzulli, 1977). For example, he has an above-average I.Q., is highly verbal, reads a great deal, is interested in "adult" problems and empathizes with others. His current problem with daily assignments in school may be a manifestation of another characteristic of the gifted, that he easily grasps the material covered in class and is bored with the routine tasks assigned by the teacher (Maker, 1982). Brent is also highly creative. His fluency of expression and imagination, as exhibited in his writing, are also characteristic of the gifted. Brent's ability to solve problems and his critical thinking skills point to his high level of creativity (Rimm, 1987). Brent's problems in his school work are probably caused by the usual confines of the classroom situation. He prefers to focus his energies on projects that are creative and are of special interest to him. (Brown, 1988)

Conclusion

Needs of the "problem" gifted are not being adequately met in the present system. Whether the problem with the gifted learner be social adjustment, under achievement, boredom, misbehavior or lack of identification, the educational mandate is to differentiate curriculum and suit it to the student's individual needs as research studies on gifted and talented

students supports. In order to differentiate current diagnosing individual difference and difficulties is essential. Parents must be willing to honestly face the problems, discuss options and work with the professionals in securing the best situation possible for their child. Counselors and teachers must work together in planning interventions for troubled gifted teenagers. We must make giftedness a life long blessing.

The Authors

Theresa Monaco, Ph.D., has served as a teacher trainer at the University of Missouri and at the University of Houston, 1969-1989. In addition to preparing teachers to teach gifted students since 1982, Theresa Monaco has spent a great amount of time working with handicapped students. She has a teaching experience foundation of 12 years in elementary and middle schools. She has been the principle investigator of numerous United States Office of Education (USOE) awards in special education and has served on several committees (1980-1984) to evaluate proposals submitted for funding. In 1982, Theresa Monaco, at the request of the University of Houston College of Education submitted the proposal to the Texas Education for establishing a major in Gifted and Talented Education. In addition to teacher training, direct teaching and fund raising activities, Theresa Monaco, with graduate level support, maintains an active gifted center hot-line for teachers, students and parents who have special concerns. Since 1982 she has written several published works on gifted education, including a Biographical Dictionary of Gifted Education, a current national directory of leaders in the field of gifted education and twelve articles that have appeared in leading journals.

Jane E. Goodner has been teaching high school English for 16 years and has taught at Ross S. Sterling High School, Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District for the last 10 years.

She began teaching in the gifted English program last year. She is currently working on a Masters of Education degree in Gifted and Talented Education at the University of Houston.

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(Note to the editor: Please use this poem and place it in the article where you think best. Thank you).

Here's To The Kids
Who Are Different

Here's to the kids who are different
The kids who don't always get A's
The kids who have ears
Twice the size of their peers
Or noses that go on for days.

Here's to the kids who are different
The kids who are just out of step
The kids they all tease
Who have cuts on their knees
And whose sneakers are constantly wet.

Here's to the kids who are different
The kids with a mischievous streak
For when they are grown, as history has shown,
It's their difference that makes them unique.

by Digby Wolfe